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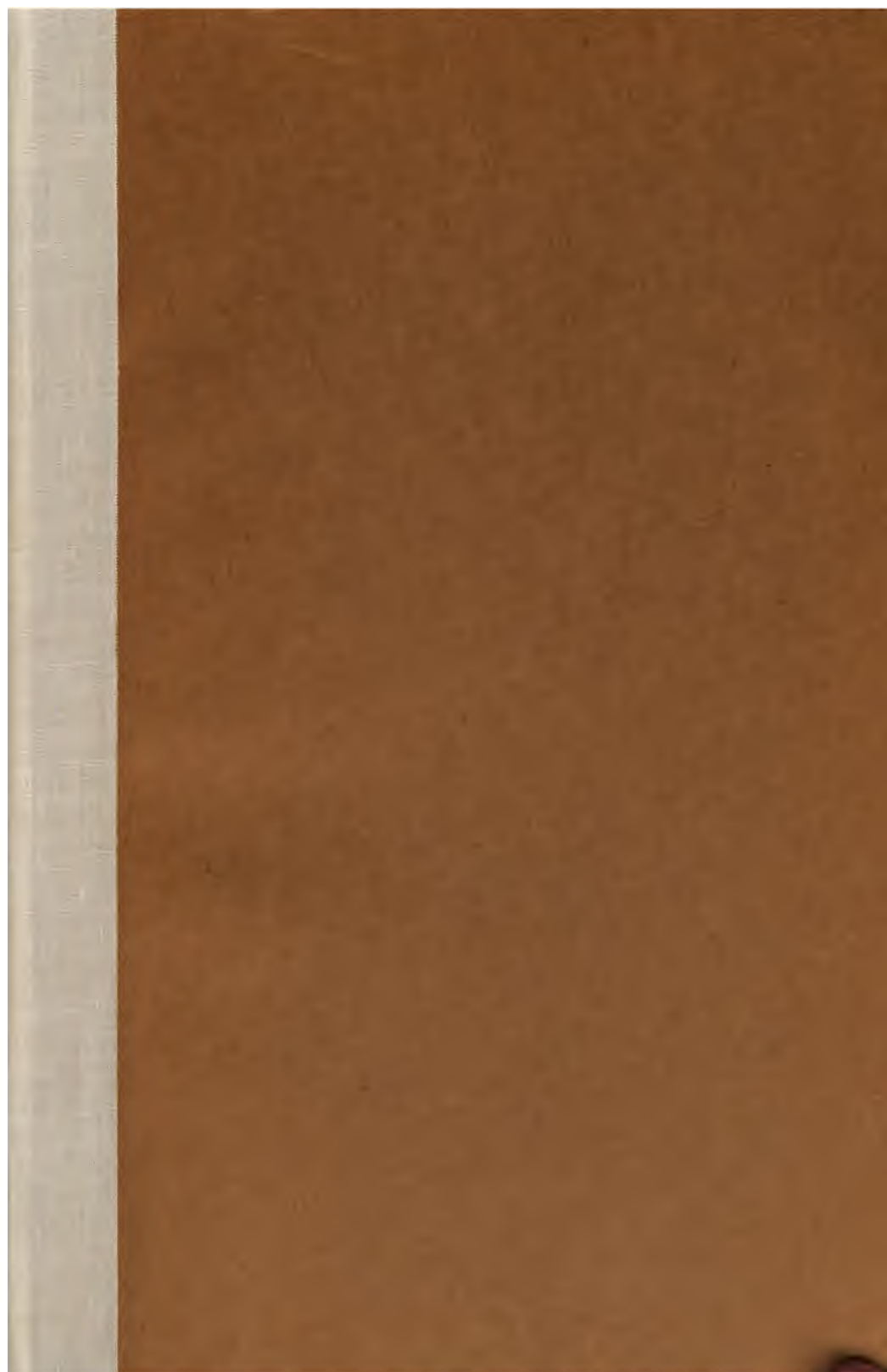
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LETCHWORTH

a town
built
on a
book

*National Library Week (Gt. Brit.) Letchworth
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LETCHWORTH

**a town
built
on a
book**

WARD AND CENTRE
GARDEN-CITY

Nº 3.



Garden City 1898

LETCHWORTH

a town built on a book

"IN these days of strong party feeling and of keenly contested social and religious issues, it might perhaps be thought difficult to find a single question having a vital bearing upon national life and well-being on which all persons, no matter of what political party, or of what shade of sociological opinion, would be found to be fully and entirely agreed."

So begins the book *To-morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* by Ebenezer Howard, published by Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, London, in 1898. Within four years this remarkable book, renamed *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, had run to its third edition, and had caused the formation of the Garden City Pioneer Company Limited on 16 July 1902.

The book contained plans and diagrams of the ideal "Garden City". On the corner of "First Avenue" and "Milton Road" in this geometrical ideal, there is a printing works; facing the town hall across the garden in "Central Park" there is the library.

First Garden City Ltd was registered on 1 September 1903, being "formed to develop an estate of about 3,800 acres, between Hitchin and Baldock".

In November of that year, "as no premises were at that time available on the estate, The Garden City Press Ltd commenced business in Bancroft, Hitchin, on premises situated in the tanyard of Messrs Geo. W. Russell & Son. It was here that the first newspaper connected with the estate was published, but its birth proved premature, and after an existence of a few months it was laid to rest."

The construction of Letchworth Garden City began in the spring of the following year, and in November 1905, with the opening of their new printing works in Pixmore Avenue, The Garden City Press Ltd became the pioneers of the

town's industries. It is interesting to note that this company was established as a co-partnership which flourished until 1917 when the majority of the 'partners' had been called up for war service.

Development of the first Garden City proceeded rapidly, and the need for cultural and social contacts among the new garden citizens found many forms of expression. On Whit Monday 1906 Mr Arthur Bates opened a small lending library in an ante-room of the Mrs Howard Memorial Hall, barely a month old, in Norton Way South. At first the entire stock consisted of review copies of the works of Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, bought with a donation of £5 from Mr Howard D. Pearsall. To start with, the library was open only on Saturdays, but as stock and demand increased, it began to open for one hour on three evenings each week, and it was manned entirely by voluntary help.

On 1 August 1906 the firm of Wheeler, Odell & Co., printers, was established, and on that date the first number of the *Letchworth Magazine* was published from their temporary premises in Green Lane, under the joint editorship of Mr Charles B. Purdom and Mr Fred J. Cole. This was followed on 22 September 1906 by the first number of the *Citizen*, edited by Mr W. H. Knight, to be succeeded in the second number by Mr Arthur William Brunt who remained editor until 1912.

August also saw the start of the building of the Temple Press, a printing and bookbinding factory for J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, the book publishers who, following the success of their new Everyman's Library, had decided to transfer their bindery from London.

By July 1907 no fewer than five printers and publishers were included in the first edition of the *Letchworth Garden City Directory*. The newcomers included the Arden Press, a Leamington firm with an established reputation for fine book printing, and the binding department of the booksellers W. H. Smith & Son, under the control of Mr Douglas Cockerell, an expert of world-wide celebrity. Smith's acquired control of the Arden Press in the following year, but all their Letchworth buildings were taken over by the Ministry of Munitions during the First World War.

Another change came in 1911, with the conversion of Wheeler, Odell & Co. to Letchworth Printers Ltd, amid the growing demands for the printed word from the rapidly increasing population of the town.

Next year the proposal was made that the four-year-old parish council should become a library authority by adopting the Public Libraries Act. This was defeated by an opposition led by the Letchworth barrister Dr Mervyn Gilbert-Smith, who felt that the town's economy could not then support a library, even with the help of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.

Nevertheless, three years later the Letchworth Book Club came into being as an appendage to the library, as a result of a meeting held at Dr Gilbert-Smith's house. Under this scheme many Letchworth residents who had more than two hundred books of their own made them available for loan through the lending library. There was a central catalogue, compiled by Dr Gilbert-Smith himself, of the six thousand books involved in this scheme, which attracted some attention as a forerunner in miniature of the national inter-library loan service of today. The club's income was made up from subscriptions, weekly payments for books, and fines.

The year after the war, with the Garden City's population up to 10,000, Letchworth Urban District Council came into existence, and the demand for new library accommodation brought about the acquisition of a room over Mr R. W. Smith's joiner's workshop in Commerce Lane.

Through the initiative of the Rev. Dugald Macfadyen a larger room over two shops in Commerce Avenue was erected, and inaugurated by a lecture on Shelley given by a well-known Hertfordshire resident, Mr George Bernard Shaw.

A co-educational school, "in keeping with the spirit and outlook of the Garden City", had been established in Letchworth in the earliest days, and in 1916 the printing craft which originated as a subject for senior pupils was of such a standard that a separate concern was formed, and St Christopher Press took its place in the industrial life of the town. Both Miss A. J. Lawrence and Mr A. W. Brunt offered a great deal of practical help and encouragement to



Letchworth Public Library



March 1966

the young early enthusiasts at the Cloisters private press.

The same year saw the re-establishment, in Letchworth, of a bookbinding business under Mr Douglas Cockerell: this time a private bindery at his own house in Norton Way South, with his sons. Douglas Cockerell "had probably more influence on bookbinding practice and design than any one man has had before". So wrote Roger Powell, himself a partner at Letchworth for some years, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Wireless aerials were appearing on roofs in Letchworth as elsewhere, and there were predictions of decline in the importance of the printed word. Yet still the popular demand for reading matter continued to grow, and in 1924 the Public Libraries Act was adopted by Hertfordshire County Council. No immediate effect was seen in Letchworth, although in the following year the Urban District Council itself became an official library authority with the adoption of the Act. An arrangement was made to take a loan collection of three thousand books—to be changed twice yearly—from the new Hertfordshire County Library, and in 1927 a collection of reference books was purchased by the town council and housed at the Museum.

Letchworth Library and Book Club continued to flourish in the Commerce Avenue premises, lending books for a small sum per week in a similar way to the various commercial libraries in the town. Colonel J. M. Mitchell, secretary of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, remarked that the library service in Letchworth was very much better than could be provided in the ordinary way upon the rateable value of the town. Such was the result of the combined efforts of the residents who made their private collections available and the devoted service of the voluntary librarians, notably Mrs Dugald Macfadyen (*née* Edith Bates), who had assisted her father, Mr Arthur Bates, from the library's beginning in 1906.

For its silver jubilee celebrations, Letchworth Library again welcomed Bernard Shaw, speaking on this occasion on "Libraries and the English Language". A "Young Folks' Library" extension was opened by Mrs Reginald Hine in 1934. But the limitations of the book club scheme were

becoming more apparent as industry in the town developed. The need to supply up-to-date scientific and technical information was a strong factor in the decision of the Urban District Council to appoint a full-time librarian, Miss M. N. Dale, in 1935, and to undertake the building of the new Public Library, which was opened by Mrs Dugald Macfadyen on 6 January 1939.

The new building included a lecture hall on the first floor, but within a year of the opening this was requisitioned as a billeting office, and remained in this use until after the Second World War.

The town continued to make a contribution to Hertfordshire County Council, in return for which the circulating stock was maintained in addition to the Urban Council's own stock of 16,000 books.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Readers Union, a subsidiary company of J. M. Dent & Sons, moved its accounts, distribution office and warehouse to Letchworth. Since then it has extended its activities by taking under its wing The Country, Sportsmans, Soccer, Science Fiction, Jazz, and Contemporary Fiction Book Clubs. These clubs supply to their members at privilege prices special editions of books which have been originally published at a higher price.

The Garden City Press Ltd, which had expanded its book and journal printing and binding activities through the years, incorporated at Letchworth the work and many of the employees of their parent company Loxley Brothers Ltd, whose London premises had been destroyed by enemy action.

The world-famed bindery of the Cockerells lost its founder on 25 November 1945, but his son, Mr Sydney Cockerell, continued production at Letchworth until he moved house and business to Grantchester nineteen years later.

Post-war expansion began, significantly, with the establishing of yet another printing firm in Letchworth, The Hive Printers Ltd, which is one of the smallest but one of the busiest in the Garden City. Plans for the expansion of Letchworth northwards into the "Grange estate" took shape; and demands on the library service grew with the

effects of the 1944 Education Act, changes in leisure and living standards, and the stimulus of radio, cinema and the newly restored television service.

Letchworth's final break with the County Library came in 1947, when the town library's own stock was large enough to end the "loan" collection. That September, "Children's Book Week" was celebrated, with visits from several well-known authors making it still more popular than the first such week, two years earlier. Widening the scope to include adults, the "Book Week" of March 1949 was opened by Miss Monica Dickens; and in accepting an invitation, Mr Robert Gibbings wrote: "I feel that I owe so much in the production of my books to Letchworth, that I could not possibly ask a higher fee, and I gladly accept the terms you suggest."

In 1953, the year of Letchworth's golden jubilee, the Public Library had a stock of 21,000 books, and an annual issue of 152,000. In December, Miss Dale resigned on leaving the town, and her deputy, Mr A. B. Drylie, became her successor, until he resigned in 1956, when the present librarian, Mr J. D. Scruby, was appointed.

This same year saw the beginning of greater extensions to the North Hertfordshire Technical College (later renamed Letchworth College of Technology), and the beginning of a new phase of library service for the area, with the close and increasing co-operation "without strings" of the college and town libraries.

As these changes took place, the golden jubilee in 1956 of the library service in Letchworth passed unobserved.

Concern was now for further expansion, to keep pace with the demands of the town's population, still only 70 per cent of the planned maximum. A small branch library for children was opened in Southfields in November 1957. Mr C. M. Crickmer, architect of the original building, was responsible for designing extensions to the Public Library and to the adjacent Museum, and these were opened by Sir Sydney Roberts in November 1962. It was a significant time in the history of Letchworth, for throughout that year local opinions had been united in the successful campaign to bring about the Letchworth Garden City Corporation

Act, which came into force on 1 January 1963, removing control of the town from First Garden City Ltd and its new board of directors.

This was also celebrated as the diamond jubilee year of Letchworth, and at sixty-plus, the Garden City seemed to be nearing the completeness of its community shape, not so unrecognizably different from that envisaged by Ebenezer Howard.

A new branch library was opened at the Grange Community Centre in 1965, and some thought was given to the future possibility of another, to serve the rapidly growing "Jackmans estate" in the south-east of the town, a development of the most advanced ideas of "neighbourhood planning", which added one more facet to the unique character of Letchworth.

This town "built on a book" today houses some 27,000 people and eighty industries, from steelfounding to swimsuits; and still the best represented trade is that of the printer and binder. Books printed in Letchworth are read all over the world, and recent years have seen the remarkable success of new and unique specialist publishing concerns, such as Harleyford Publications, with their authoritative series on aviation history, and Bradda Books, publishers of Russian educational works.

Dent's great output includes their remarkable Everyman's Library, and *Everyman's Encyclopaedia*, to which many local people have contributed. A Letchworth resident, Mr John Armitage, is the British editor of a still more renowned work, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Reference and information services are developing fast, particularly through HERTIS, the County Library's Technical Information Service, to which Letchworth has access through the College of Technology. The stock of the college library itself is around 15,000 books, with approximately 400 periodicals.

But still Letchworth homes house treasured private collections, such as the Sassoon Collection of Hebrew manuscripts and early printed books, and Mr Kenneth Coram's collection of children's books covering the past two centuries.

Three bookshops flourish in the town today: a branch of W. H. Smith & Son in Leys Avenue (opened in 1907), George Bollen in Station Road (opened in 1946), and David's Bookshop in Station Place (opened in 1963). And even though the small commercial library is almost a thing of the past, one was recently opened by Mrs Rhodes—in a room over R. W. Smith's workshop in Commerce Lane!

Of the future of the library service, much depends on the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, which makes the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service the duty of every library authority, and may cause changes in the status of some library authorities of less than 40,000 population.

Letchworth's planned maximum population is 32,000—extended in the more recent County Plan to 34,000. The Public Library's annual issue of books is now nearing the 400,000 mark; its stock, 60,000; but it remains to be seen how the library service of the first Garden City will stand in relation to the wider aspects of county and regional development. One thing is certain, that the garden citizens' personal interest in the production, reading and enjoyment of books will continue.

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